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ABSTRACT

The lives of students with special needs are often chaotic, and they have difficulty with organization. The unfamiliar experience of a new substitute teacher can spring chaos into their lives. It is important to teach students, particularly those with special learning needs, techniques for coping with the unavoidable changes that occur when a substitute is present. It is also important to prepare substitutes to meet the needs of these students. The perception by students, parents, administrators, and colleagues that substitutes are less than full professionals hinders their effectiveness. Substitute teachers take up 5-10 percent of a student's time in school; therefore, actions should be taken to make substitutes more effective. Areas of concern include substitutes' behavior management skills, substitutes' instructional skills and content knowledge, district policy on substitute assignment, emergency procedures, a substitute handbook, and training incentives. Recommendations for structuring good substitute programs include: (1) improving collaboration between the substitute teacher and the school district; (2) evaluating and providing feedback to substitutes; (3) improving recruitment procedures; (4) developing and providing a substitute teacher's handbook on school rules and policies; (5) clarifying the substitute's role and making expectations clear; (6) providing specific inservice training on classroom management; (7) improving the lesson plans that substitutes receive; and (8) appointing a district substitute coordinator. (Contains 10 references.) (TD)

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SUBSTITUTE TEACHERS AND STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: PROBLEMS IN RURAL AREAS

Introduction

Students with special needs require structure and regular routines to help them feel secure. Their lives are often chaotic and they have difficulty with organization. When a new substitute teacher is in the room, the unfamiliar experience springs chaos back into their lives. Lerner (1997) describes the need for the teacher to provide structure and have rapport with students with learning disabilities. Smith (1998) also discusses the need for consistency, structure and routine for other disabilities such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, and behavior disorders.

A teacher that takes steps to teach social skills and that helps students to accept differences can make a big impact on people's perceptions of students with disabilities. Students in special education need to feel secure that all of their efforts will be recognized and that they will not be set up for ridicule if their deficiencies are exposed. Consistency is key to the success of social skills training, but a substitute teacher that is unfamiliar with the instructional program and student emotional needs may disrupt this consistency.

Substitute Teacher Concerns

The time substitute teachers spend with students is increasing because educational reforms give added responsibilities to the regular teachers that take them out of the classroom. Substitutes are brought in to pick up the slack. Billman (1994) claims that substitute teachers oversee five solid months in a typical student's K-12 education. Others studies note that up to 10 percent of the nation's classrooms have substitute teachers (Nidds & McGerald, 1994; Ostapczuk, 1994; Wyld, 1995). If the substitutes are not trained to work effectively with the students, then valuable time is lost.

Case law holds the substitute, principal, and school district to the same standard of care as it does regular teachers, and each is liable for acts of negligence (Cotton, 1995). The school is held legally responsible to work effectively on the IEP goals even when there is a substitute teacher in the classroom. If we are to change the negative outcomes that happen to students with special needs, we need to become more effective teachers. If substitute teachers take up 5 or 10 percent of a student's time in school, then it is important that we train substitutes to be more effective teachers.

Baby-sitters, fair game, stopgap, object of pity, and warm body are common perceptions of a substitute. The lot of substitute teachers is generally not a happy one (Nidds & McGerald, 1994). For the most part, they tend to be treated as a marginal member of the education community (Ostapczuk, 1994; Wyld, 1995). Students, teachers, or administrators regard substitutes as less than full professionals who meet accepted standards of practice-perceiving them as less effective than first-year and student teachers. While often considering themselves to be effective instructors, substitutes frequently do not see themselves as professionals (Billman, 1994; Ostapczuk, 1994). Students may ask substitutes if they want to become a real teacher.

The perception by students, parents, and colleagues that substitutes are merely babysitters or pinch-hitters—the "warm body stereotype"—are hurdles for the substitute to overcome (Wyld, 1995). Complaints about

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substitutes lacking qualifications, and pedagogical and classroom management skills are often heard from school staff (Ostapczuk, 1994). These problems are not new. The same problems were documented 50 years ago (Ostapczuk, 1994) and progress is slow because solving the problem and training substitutes seems to be a low priority in most school districts (St. Michel, 1995).

Behavior Management: Necessary Skills

Substitute teachers face unique challenges in maintaining classroom behavior. Generally they are present for short periods of time. They have little time to develop rapport with students. They are not members of the daily faculty and have limited time to report to teachers and administrators. Students may assume they have less authority. Substitute teachers may be unfamiliar with the physical layout, faculty structure, discipline policy, and schedule routines. Couple these challenges with the fact that many students see a substitute teachers as an opportunity to avoid work and have some fun, and it is not difficult to understand why behavior and discipline are top concerns.

Some of the best proactive steps to a good day for a substitute occur before the substitute even arrives. Quality lesson plans and notes from the regular classroom teacher can make the day more organized and productive. The substitute should also have a clear understanding of class rules, expectations and the normal sequence of consequences for non-compliance.

The administration plays a role in the respect that substitutes establish in the classroom. Substitutes need to be aware of the district discipline policy before they can be expected to enforce it. In the interest of establishing authority with the students it is usually best for the substitute to handle minor incidences without administrative intervention.

Improving Substitute Teacher Classroom Behavior Management

Demands for skilled substitutes can be met by improving the training and support for these essential members of education. The most immediate support available to a substitute teacher are the lesson plans and information left by the classroom teacher. Well thought out, organized and detailed plans can ease the transition for students and staff. Administration must require that appropriate lessons are always available to the substitute. In response, substitutes need to follow lesson plans to the best of their ability. By staying on track with the daily routine and current subject matter, substitutes will ease the disorientation their presence can cause some students.

Substitutes who are familiar with the students and class procedures will be less likely to fall victim to the disruptive behavior that often occurs when substitutes are called in to teach. Substitutes could be permanently assigned to a school building. This would allow substitutes to be visible members of the school staff. In a district with standardized curriculum across individual grade level it could be beneficial to assign a substitute for one or two grade levels. By substituting in the same grade level classrooms teachers would be more familiar with the curriculum and the regular classroom teacher's procedures.

Developing Substitute's Academic Instruction Skills

All educators including substitute teachers should have a working knowledge of commonly used adaptations for presenting material and testing student knowledge. This issue is first introduced during university preparation and can be subsidized by later inservice training and or observation of experienced teachers. Examples include; outlines, study guides, division of assignments into smaller more manageable chunks, extended time for completion, or oral testing.

When the substitute is present, the best option is that instruction be a continuation or the same as it would be with the regular teachers. This may pose a problem, particularly with some secondary subjects and special

education settings where the substitute may lack certification or training. Substitutes with special education certification are rare. Regular teacher preparation for the substitute should include clear and concise information including keys and grading rubrics that make clear what is expected of the student's work. A sample of completed work may be provided with notes on specific areas of focus for that particular lesson. A few suggestions about ways to help meet students' needs are also helpful. For instance, John who struggles with hyperactivity may benefit from working with his study buddy who helps him stay on task. Organization of the information is vital so that the substitute does not waste valuable time scrounging for this information and can quickly scan it before having to teach it or assist students in their work.

Substitute Assignment Policies

The least effective way to assign substitutes is on a first come, first serve basis. When students have a five-day stint with five different substitutes or even a different person each time they have a substitute, valuable time is lost trying to develop routine and rapport. Unfortunately this is often the way substitutes are assigned, particularly with a shortage of good substitutes. One approach mentioned in the literature is hiring permanent, full-time substitutes to create a dependable cadre of experienced replacement teachers. The substitute is placed on the district payroll (Nidds & McGerald, 1994; Wyld, 1995), then when not needed to fill in for absent teachers, these individuals may perform other school responsibilities, such as assisting with curriculum development. This may also provide an opportunity to be more involved with special needs students and have greater preparation when there is a substitute in the classroom. They have already developed rapport between teacher and student and the substitute is familiar with the routine.

A novel attempt at developing substitute programs was described in an article titled "A 'Super Sub' Is Not a Sandwich" (Frier & Creech, 1990). The program assigned the superintendent and other administrators to volunteer as substitutes at least once a year. This gave administrators a unique look at substitute issues. It also had the side benefit of encouraging teachers to develop better plans and substitute folders since they never knew when the superintendent might be substituting in their classroom.

Emergency Procedures

Emergency procedures are practiced so that when a stressful emergency situation occurs, people can automatically carry through with steps that minimize the emergency. The possibilities include everything from health problems of individual students to a school wide disaster. Violence prevention and management policies are increasingly added to the types of emergency drill in schools. Preparation of the substitute in these areas can have life-saving consequences.

Substitute Handbook and Folders

An important resource for the substitute is a well-developed handbook. Logistical information such as calendars, bell and class schedules, maps, school wide discipline procedures, playground and cafeteria rules, and duty schedules, a list of teachers and staff with their subjects and room numbers. Procedures and expectations of the substitute as well as ways to report or communicate with the teacher and administration should be included. Examples of forms such as attendance, discipline, or hall passes can be helpful. It is very important that the substitute is able to have the information as early as possible. Handbooks should be given to substitutes during orientation training before school starts so they have time to study the information.

Substitute folders for each teacher is another important resource for the substitute. This should include all information that will help the substitute be successful in the classroom. Seating charts, schedules, routines, and lesson plans that make it possible for the substitute to concentrate on effective instruction instead of replanning the day should be provided. The folder should contain hints on effective techniques for teaching students with

special needs, or ways to be successful with behavior management. A description of where to find things or helpful people—student and staff—to ask for help also helps the substitute orient themselves quickly.

Training Incentives

Including substitutes in staff development through in-service training, either designed specifically for substitutes or including them in regular in-service training may help develop the expertise of the substitutes (Nidds & McGerald, 1994; Ostapczuk, 1994). Encouraging substitutes to hone their skills might be accomplished by adding a five-dollars-a-day bonus for substitutes that complete orientation training, inservice, classroom observations, or workshops for professional development. Additionally, many schools engaged in restructuring or other reform initiatives have found that pre-service students who have extended on-site field work or internships can be cost-effective, short-term replacements for teachers who need time for non-instructional professional work (Abdal-Haqq, 1996).

Concluding Recommendations

Recommendations for structuring good substitute programs include:
(1) improve collaboration between the substitute teacher and the school district,
(2) evaluate and provide feedback to substitutes,
(3) improve recruitment procedures,
(4) develop and provide a substitute teacher's handbook on school rules and policies,
(5) clarify the substitute's role and make expectations clear,
(6) provide specific inservice training on classroom management,
(7) improve the lesson plans substitutes receive, and
(8) appoint a district substitute coordinator.

Additional recommendations include:
(1) improve employment benefits,
(2) treat substitutes as professionals, and
(3) maintain an up-to-date, comprehensive database of all substitutes in the district.

It is important to teach students coping techniques, particularly students with special learning needs, for unavoidable changes in the environment that happen when a substitute is present. At the same time, it is important to prepare substitutes to meet the needs of these students either through training or appropriate lesson plans and environmental structures established in the classroom. Administrative and logistical procedures need to be looked at to see if the needs of these students are considered when assigning substitute teachers. Are the best practices utilized by substitutes to meet the needs of the students, or is the mindset of the substitutes focused on surviving the school day? What are the attitudes of educators about finding solutions to problems that may occur when substitutes are present? Is this a low priority problem or one that most educators don't consider because they are too busy with other educational concerns? Reflection and evaluation are important steps to improvement in this long neglected area. Improvements, however, can increase the likelihood that substituting can be an effectual tool in education, including in special education settings.

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